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No Laughing Matter

Finger Pulling Championships in the Alps

It may sound funny, but for some Bavarian and Austrian men finger wrestling is no joke. They take it very seriously: For them it's about prestige and honor.Tweet 0 1 

In the old days, people say, it was used to settle disputes. Today it has the standing of a national sport in the Alpine region of southern Germany and neighboring Austria.

But anyone who thinks *Fingerhakeln* -- "finger wrestling" -- is some kind of amusing time-waster Bavarian men engage in after a few too many beers down at the village inn is very mistaken. The sport's practitioners take it very seriously.

So seriously, in fact, that before a major contest they subject the finger they intend to do battle with -- most chose their middle finger -- to a punishing training regime. Some of the wrestlers like to crush tennis balls with their hands; others will do pull-ups with only their middle fingers; and some have even been known to make their digits lift weights of up to 50 kilograms.

Yet, regardless of the training program, all the finger wrestlers share the same goal: to have a finger that is as strong as humanly possible.

The contest works as follows: Two contestants, usually men, sitting on opposite sides of a substantial table, thread their fingers into a strap. Once in position, they wait for the referee to give a signal, before pulling as hard as they possibly can. The winner is the person who manages to pull the other contestant across the table, using only his finger.

Just as in traditional wrestling matches, competitors are divided into several classes according to age and weight. There is a light, middle, semi-heavy and heavyweight division -- the last one being for anyone over 90 kilograms (200 pounds).

Every year, expert finger wrestlers battle it out to be crowned the Bavarian, German or International Alpine Country champion. The International Alpine Championships are held in Ohlstadt, a picturesque village in Upper Bavaria. Despite the competition claiming to be an international contest, it isn't really a multi-national affair. In fact, apart from Germans, the only other people that enter are Austrians.

To become a champion finger wrestler one obviously needs strength, but also good technique and the grit to put up with a fair amount of pain -- as any contestant knows, dislocated fingers are an everyday part of the sport. However, according to one finger wrestler, the most important attribute is the size of one's finger. "You have to have a fat finger, so that the strap has a good hold," Anton Utzschneider, a finger wrestler for 38 years, explained.

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